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30. Reading *Transsexuality* in “Gay” Tehran (Around 1979)

Afsaneh Najmabadi

Prior to the Iranian Revolution in 1979, historian Afsaneh Najmabadi points out, Tehran had a reputation in the West as being a “gay paradise.” In the present day, Iran attracts Western attention for the apparent contradiction that sodomy (often conflated with modern gay identity) is punishable by death but transsexuality is a state-sanctioned practice through which individuals may change gender markers and obtain reassignment surgeries. Both narratives obscure a complex history of transsexuality within Iran. Najmabadi, an Iranian feminist historian and professor at Harvard, offers a detailed account of how gender reassignment was treated by the Iranian state from about 1970, in the waning days of the Pahlavi regime, until just after the revolution of 1979. She tells a story of friction between older and newer gender and sexual categories, of changing medical discourses about gender reassignment and sex change, and of individuals who were creative and resourceful in living their lives in an atmosphere of anxiety about shifting gender norms. Drawing on mass media and medical documents as well as interviews, this chapter shows how gender non-conforming people carved out spaces of relative acceptance in entertainment and media professions, and demonstrates the ways in which lines between what was

then designated as gay and trans were far blurrier than they subsequently became in post-revolutionary Iran. With this historical background to Maryam Mulk-ara's successful petition for a fatwa permitting transsexuals to transition legally, Najmabadi tracks the emergence of a transsexuality that operated alongside, but independently of, different transsexualities in Europe, North America, and elsewhere.

Tehran in the early 1970s offered a spectrum of overlapping conceptions of maleness and masculinities. This spectrum structured everyday practices of life with regard to non-heteronormative male gender/sexual desires, and it construed non-heteronormative maleness as being at once criminal, immoral, and theatrical. This article offers a preliminary mapping of that scene. It is not, and cannot be, a social history of “gay Tehran.” Although the available scholarly writing on this topic agrees on the existence of an “active gay subculture”¹ in 1970s Tehran, this literature is anecdotal, and the critical archival research necessary to produce a proper history remains yet to be done. But I also want to argue that to name the 1970s as the decade of a *gay* Tehran obscures important (in)distinctions between what is now named gay (always considered male in this context by all writers on the topic) and what is now considered MtF trans. My purpose is thus to offer an initial survey of the complex overlaps and connections between these sorts

of non-heteronormative lives. I want to trace continuities across the “before” and “after” of the 1979 revolution, as well as note the ruptures introduced by regime change into the scene of male non-heteronormativities. Simply casting the advent of the Islamic Republic as the brutal end of Gay Tehran does not do justice to the complexity of the tale.

The story of “Gay Tehran” in the 1970s has been articulated in at least two domains. At the time, there were a number of articles about Tehran’s “gay scene” in the American gay press, which reported its extermination by the policies of the Islamic Republic in the 1980s.² There is an implicit progressivist dynamic to these stories: the emerging gay subculture of Tehran would have evolved naturally into a livelier, more open, gay Tehran, except that its life was cut short through the 1979 revolution and subsequent Islamization of society. As Jerry Zarit’s end-of-the-decade article put it succinctly, “Iran was for me, and for others like me, a sexual paradise. In terms of both quantity and quality it was the most exciting experience of my life.”³ The quests of Western gays for a sexual paradise in Iran specifically, while unselfconsciously reenacting broader cultural tendencies to sexualize an exotic “Orient,” were most likely influenced by the publication and enormous popularity of Mary Renault’s *The Persian Boy* in 1972, which was widely reviewed and reported on in the American gay press in the 70s.⁴

A second domain for the formation of the “Gay Tehran” story has been within Iranian diasporic gay communities—some members of which personally experienced the 1970s there.⁵ But their recollections are narrated through later *gay* identification developed in their new homes, which, in the 1980s and 1990s when much of this immigration took place, were dominated by a particular style of sexual identity politics. The Iranian gay diasporic progressivist narrative was informed by this sensibility—and through the lens of later identities, earlier sexual and gender subjectivities and practices came to be seen as problematic and backward.

From its earliest manifestation in the diasporic press, Iranian gay identity marked its emergence through a disidentification with that past. This included a very clear demarcation between *hamjinsgara’i* [same-sex inclination/orientation] and *hamjinsbazi* [same-sex playing].⁶ The former has been embraced as a modern form of identification that outwardly expresses a true inner self; *hamjinsbazi*, on the other hand, has been disavowed, perhaps because of its pejorative use by government officials, in condemnatory religious texts, in pathologizing contexts by medical professionals, or in hostile general usage within Iranian society and culture at large. The disavowal of *hamjinsbazi* by diasporic gays has been articulated through turning societal and cultural abjection back onto the concept itself: they disavow same-sex-playing due to its presumed abusive character, and

its being marked by disparities of age and economics. This is in contrast to same-sex-oriented relations (characterized as *hamjinsgara'i*) that allow for genuinely egalitarian romantic relationships among same-sex partners.⁷ The differentiating move between *hamjinsgara'i* and *hamjinsbazi* thus articulates a homonormative response to an anti-heteronormative project.⁸

The imaginary of “Gay Tehran” works differently in these two domains. For the growing gay liberation movement of the 1970s in the United States, traveling to “Gay Tehran,” in fiction or in person, was a search for one’s “own kind” beyond national borders. In that sense, it fit well with liberationist dreams of the internationalization of activism, and with solidarity work based on “finding the same everywhere” (as in, “Sisterhood is Global”).⁹ Within diasporic Iranian gay activist politics, imagining the “Gay Tehran” of the 1970s offered a critical intervention into the Iranian cultural politics of denial that insisted on the foreignness of non-normative gender/sexual desires and practices. My point here is not to question the sociological existence of such non-normative desires and practices, but to suggest, rather, that imagining them and the period of 1970s as *gay* may prevent other, equally pertinent ways of thinking about the scene of male non-normative gender/sexuality during that decade. Actively un-familiarizing ourselves with what already has been read through the prism of “Gay Tehran” would, I hope, open up the possibility of seeing differently, and asking different

questions about, non-heteronormative practices of life at that time.

The Spectacle of Unmanly Males

The “Gay Tehran” I wish to reread was part of a complex, rapidly growing urban society, in certain domains of which particular styles of non-heteronormative male lives were becoming somewhat visible. This was particularly the case in the growing entertainment industry, which ran the gamut from high-quality modern film and television shows to nightclubs that catered to a range of class-inflected tastes. “Lower class” clubs were performance venues that sustained older and more traditional forms of male dance and entertainment, while the performance of such dances in newer, more cosmopolitan nightclubs, and in film, made them more visible to a layer of the urban middle-class population that may not have been exposed to them in earlier decades; indeed, the urban middle class may well have developed its sense of modern-ness in part from the disavowal of such cultural enactments.

Stories of females living unusual masculine lives fascinated the public during this period; such stories were common features in history books, neighborhood gossip, newspapers, and magazines from 1950s through the 1970s.¹⁰ In many of these cases, especially in the women’s press of the 1960s, the

stories of females living masculine lives would be rescued from the suspicion of “improper sexuality” through the affirmation of a modern marriage ideal, the failure of which had pushed women into these unusual paths, through cruel arranged marriages or good-for-nothing husbands. Alternatively, economic hardship and the social inhospitality of many professions to women were said to have forced the choice of masculine living. This acceptable configuration of public female non-normative gender self-styling did not have an equivalent for males: males who did not or could not marry and perform their “marital duties” could not get away from their social obligations through a surfeit of feminine performance.

In earlier eras, a male dressing as a woman and opting for a womanly career constituted “housewifery,” that is, becoming a male kept by a man.¹¹ By the mid-twentieth century, such a practice of life was no longer possible; it would have added scandalous shame to the insult and injury of refusing adult manhood. Males then who wanted to *live* womanly lives tended to keep it a secret, fearing censure and punishment. Such was the fate of a male person who had worked for 19 years as a masseuse in a women’s public bath.¹² In another case, a male person who had lived and worked for the previous 50 years as a woman was forced into men’s clothes, with her hair shaved off her head.¹³ In yet another case, a male person refused to leave the hospital in men’s clothes, after being forced to

undergo “disambiguating sex-surgery,” and declared her intention to continue living a womanly life.¹⁴ Reports of such incidents in the press never had an admiring or approving edge to them; rather, they were cause for apprehension and incomprehension.

A less scandalized report on a “young man who dresses and behaves in a completely contrary fashion,” who wore his hair long and was a dancer, constituted an exception: he was considered to stand out as “a red bean on the surface of rice pudding” (i.e., he was a spectacle). The magazine *Khvandaniha*’s lengthy account of the case was made possible in part through displacing his contrarian self-presentation onto his “unusual background,” the product of an Azerbaijani father and a mother from Istanbul.¹⁵ The report vacillated in tone, sometimes sympathetically presenting the “young man” as a philosophically-oriented intellectual, at other times as a weird recluse, and sometimes as someone whose unconventional self-presentation produced unwanted social reaction: he was followed by curious street kids who made fun of him; he had been arrested twice for appearing inappropriately in public. A line drawing of his face (compared to a full stature photograph) made his face look more female by emphasizing his plucked eyebrows and giving him fuller hair. He was said to have eventually opted for a more routine life, by opening a sandwich shop on Maulavi Street in a popular southern Tehran neighborhood. This “young man’s”

style of public self-presentation, and his former profession as a performer in an Azerbaijani dance troupe, positioned him at the very limit of social tolerance: there was an accepted, if marginal, vocation for males to dance or otherwise perform female roles in theater and, more recently, the cinema.

The figure of the male performer or dancer has a long history in Iran. Anthony Shay's numerous essays offer us a rich conceptual vocabulary for understand the cultural work of this figure and its history, not only for the Tehran of the 1970s, but also into the present. Several of Shay's propositions are pertinent here. He challenges "the romantic views that many gay men hold that the presence of male dancers and the sexual interest expressed toward them by Middle Eastern men somehow constitutes evidence for an environment accepting of homosexuality and a utopian gay paradise," and "the oft-expressed viewpoint that male dancers were imitating or parodying women.... The presence of male dancers, professional and nonprofessional, in public and private space requires a (re)evaluation of the meaning of these male bodies."¹⁶ Shay argues that in the 1970s in Iran, modern choreographers attempted to eradicate traces of the earlier male choreographic tradition by creating what he calls hypermasculine styles of movement for male dancers, often within "folk dance" choreographies, "suitable to the urban Westernized male and their sensitive elite audiences."¹⁷ As he notes, the older style of male dancers continued their performances in the "gritty

underworld” of nightclubs and cafés. Indeed, “In the late 1960s and early 1970s a wave of nostalgia for Qajar-era [pre-1925] performing and decorative styles swept through Tehran, where a number of cafés sprang up in which former boy dancers, now elderly but still capable performers, appeared.”¹⁸ The sharp contrasts between the two modes of male dance performance, Shay concludes, point to “the underlying changes in attitudes toward sexuality and gender.”¹⁹

Because male dancers and *zan-push* [woman-attired] actors continued to work in the café entertainment scene as well as in some of the “grittier” nightclubs, these more traditional male dancers and entertainers increasingly may have been marked, for the emerging urban middle classes, as a lower-class taste tainted by the immorality of a suspected sexual availability. But the figure of the female-attired male actor/dancer attained a new, somewhat more respectable, life in the cinema and in “legitimate” theatrical productions.²⁰ The dominant style of male-actors-performing-female-roles was what William Beeman has called “pretend mimic,” that is, looking like a woman but achieving a “distance” from the female through the exaggeration of clothing, make-up, voice, and body movements. It was a style of performance already prevalent in the 1940s and 1950s, and there was a significant traffic, even then, between the worlds of stage and screen and the ongoing public conversations about sex change, which circulated around such figures.

In 1955, for example, *Khvandaniha* published in its regular “Album of Artists” page a picture of the actor ‘Ali Tabish, dressed as woman, along with a commentary entitled “Is this a man or a woman?” (Figure 30.1):

You have frequently read in the press that in such and such corner of the world, for example in Europe or America, a woman or a man was fed up with her/his own (sex!) and with a surgery her/his constitution was changed.

This (twentieth century whim) has not yet found adherents in Iran, so the man you see in this picture in women’s clothes, standing with special coquettishness, is our very own famous actor ‘Ali Tabish. Since he hasn’t had any luck with manhood, he decided to don for a few hours the attire of (devil’s apprentices), not in street and public but in the play (Charley’s Aunt) in which he plays the role of a capricious woman.²¹

<INSERT FIGURE 30.1>

Zan-push performances were included in many pre-Revolutionary films of the so-called “Film Farsi” period, including *Madmuvazil Khaleh* (*Ms. Auntie*, 1957, dir. Amin Amini) with ‘Ali Tabish playing the aunt figure; *Zalim-bala* (translated

on the film posters as *The Naughty Girl*, 1957, dir. Siamak Yasami); and *Shabaji Khanum* (1958, dir. Sadiq Bahrami). The anxious fantasy of waking up as the other sex was reflected in the satirical 1959 film, *'Arus Kudumeh? (Which One is the Bride*, dir. Farrukh Ghaffari).²²

As Beeman notes, “Sexuality is also an important undertone for the ‘mimetic’ female portrayers.... Since these actors, with few exceptions, claim to be fully heterosexual males, this situation can be an uncomfortable social position for them.”²³ This “uncomfortable social position” was much murkier for male dancers who performed in the “gritty world” of lower-class nightclubs. In the 1950s, *Khvandaniha* and other magazines would publish alarming reports, with lurid photographs, about the nightclub life of Tehran (as well as major European cities), emphasizing that these spaces were populated by men dressing up as women to exploit male clients.²⁴ They depicted a steamy and seamy nightlife in which hard-working citizens, lured by the temptations of alcohol, music, and dance, would be taken advantage of and robbed by “available” male and female performers. According to one 1954 report, of a total of 332 cafés and restaurants in Tehran, only a dozen actually offered musical and dance performances. These were said to be clustered largely in two areas of Tehran—Laleh-zar and the district around Shahr-i nau (Tehran’s red-light district). The report further implied an overlap between sex-work and the entertainment offered

in these nightclubs by describing several of them as run by women named Khanum, a designation often used, in this context, for women who bossed their own group of sex-workers. The report included several photographs of performers and clients, including one of a male dancer, Baqir Namazi [Figure 30.2].²⁵

< INSERT FIGURE 30.2 >

At other times, a male dancer would come to public attention accidentally—often in the context of charges of “taking advantage” (ighfal, a word with a high sexual charge) of men, or of scuffles leading to injuries and pressing of charges, all of which worked to consolidate the association of criminality and public disturbance with non-normative gender/sexual presentations. Such was the case of Akbar Burzabadi, who was arrested after knifing one of a group of young men who had been harassing him on a Tehran street. Akbar was “a woman-presenting man [mard-i zan-numa] who makes himself up as a woman and works at one of Tehran’s popular musical [saz-u-zarbi] café-restaurants. Yesterday evening, Akbar, with wig and heavy make-up, left home to go to work.” He was followed and harassed by a group of young men, and eventually attacked them with a knife, injuring one of them, who filed a complaint. The paper added, “The officers [at the police station] indicated that he

had been booked several times in the past on the charge of taking advantage of men; he sits at café customers' tables, looking like a woman, and taking advantage of them."²⁶

In the context of Tehran's nightlife, a "distancing" style of feminine mimesis could signal particular kinds of gender/sexual desire: it could be enacted by males who wanted to present themselves as female-acting non-females (thus the need for "distancing exaggerations") who wanted to be desirable to men who desired female-presenting non-females. At the same time, some males opted for "complete" mimesis—working as female dancers and intending to be taken totally for women. This style of mimesis allowed some males to live as women.²⁷ Such, for instance, was the case of one café dancer known as Nargis Salihi who was believed to be a woman and had worked for five years before it was found out that s/he was born male, as Nasir Salihi. [Figure 30.3] The "outing" resulted from a café scuffle that led to Salihi and a number of clients being detained at the local police station. When interrogated at the police station, Salihi explained that she had moved to Tehran from the small provincial town of Arak five years ago. Because she "was very fond of wearing women's clothes," she explained, "I made myself look like a young woman. I then went to the town registry in Ray [at the time, a small suburb of Tehran] and declared my birth certificate lost and requested a new one in the name of Nargis Salihi. With the new birth certificate, I

began a career of singing and dancing and have developed a circle of admirers.”²⁸

<INSERT FIGURE 30.3>

Both styles of self-fashioning continue to inform MtF public presentations in Iran today, and are often cause for tension between those who want to completely live as women, and thus argue against the exaggerated femaleness of those other MtFs, who, in their opinion, “are giving a bad name to the community.”²⁹ In the 1970s, these two analytically distinct styles of male non-heteronormativity existed more as a continuum, which also included a range of other strategies for males-living-as-women. Some were individuals such as Nargis, who lived as women without undergoing any form of medicalized body modification, but a growing number of people opted for various degrees of hormonal and surgical intervention.

The world of non-heteronormative males was visible in the 1970s not only in the world of “gritty” entertainment. The upper echelons of an expansive art world—painters, photographers, television producers and performers—were also rumored to harbor non-masculine males. Indeed, the two poles of the culture industry were not sealed off from each other. At elite parties catering to males who dressed as women, members of high society mingled with *khanums* who

worked in menial day jobs.³⁰ One difference was that the very rich could dress at home and be safely driven to such parties by their chauffeurs, whereas the less affluent had to change clothes on arrival. These get-togethers were the non-heteronormative male equivalent of *daureh* parties (women's-night-out parties that rotated on a circuit between different women's homes). The more well-to-do males would throw lavish parties and invite the rest of their circles —sometimes numbering in the hundreds.

Not all men-loving men in Iran during this period opted for feminine styles, of course.³¹ Many lived lives scarcely distinguishable from other men, but they often socialized with the more “flamboyant” non-masculine-attired males.³² These spaces of socialization gained the name of “gay parties” or “gay bars” in international gay media coverage, as well as in collective memories of 1970s Tehran for Iranians in later decades. But males-living-as-women who socialized through these networks did not consider themselves homosexual, and they defined their relationship with men in heterosexual terms. Within these intimate [*khaudi*] circles, they addressed each other by their female names. Many lived double lives. By day they dressed as men and went to work as such; some were even married and had children. At night, they lived as women.³³ The parties they attended were not a space for finding potential lovers or partners, but rather a place to dance and have fun, to exchange gossip about one's adventures, and to

meet people like oneself (which by definition excluded people who were one's target of desire).

Some of these trends continue into the present. Today's "gay parties" similarly are seen to be for people of the same kind. Behzad, a gay-identified man in his early fifties when I interviewed him in Tehran in 2007, seemed resigned to a single life. When I asked him why he didn't go to gay parties to try to meet someone, he was puzzled: "why would I go to a party to spend time with people like myself? Years ago, in my twenties and thirties, when I was still trying to figure things out for myself, I used to go to some of these parties—they are good for the younger folk so they don't feel they are the only ones who are not like others."³⁴ Cyrus, a gay-identified man in his early thirties, similarly did not consider the parties a place to find a partner, describing them rather as places "for hanging out with like-minded men." He met his last two partners at the gym, and noted: "the men who pick me up, they are all either married—and I move away from them as soon as I find out—or else I lose them to marriage sooner or later. It is very depressing."³⁵ The distinction within the party scene that Behzad and Cyrus both described is between those who (like them) do not look very different from straight men, and those who have what Behzad called "girlie-like" styles of self-presentation. But all the attendees would be looking "out there," not within the gay parties, for potential lovers and partners. This structure of desire and

identification reflects the dominance of a larger discourse in twentieth-century Iran that has transformed males and females into “opposite sexes,” and which depends on the notion that “opposites attract”—a discourse that sets the parameters of sexual/gender subjectivity, whether normative or not.³⁶

We have no ethnographies, nor published memoirs, that would help map this non-heteronormative culture in the 1970s. We have instead a vast circulation of rumors from the time that have since acquired the status of fact. It was, and still often is, said that by the 1970s Iranian television had become a safe heaven for *gay* men, who enjoyed the protection of not only Reza Qotbi, the director of National Iranian Radio and Television and a cousin of Queen Farah Pahlavi, but, somewhat equivocally, of the Queen herself. When the Tehran daily *Kayhan* published a report about the purported wedding celebration of two gay men in a club, the Queen is said to have reacted negatively and asked the men involved and their friends to behave more responsibly and avoid such excesses in the future. In their defense, the men are said to have clarified that the celebration was a birthday party that had been misreported in the press.³⁷ Kavus, a self-identified gay in his late fifties in 2007, similarly recalled the public view of such marriages as a misrecognition: “How could two khanums get married?” He laughed. He described such occasions as carnivalesque “dressing-up parties,” in which two khanums would present themselves as a bride and groom.³⁸ In real life, he

added, “both of them would be interested in *straight* [pronounced as in English] married men. Targeting married men was like a conquest, a proof of womanliness. In these parties, they would brag about who had succeeded in breaking up which marriage.” If a khanum developed a special relationship with a lover, sometimes, s/he would “marry” this guy. But the occasion was not a public ritual, nor was it celebrated by a “wedding party.” At most, for a keepsake, they would go to a commercial photographer for a “wedding portrait,” for the occasion of which the khanum might change into a wedding gown.

The Shame of Unmanly Males and the Hope of Gender Ambiguity

The emergence in the 1970s of more visible scenes of non-heteronormative maleness, along with increased knowledge of such scenes circulating in speech and print, was widely perceived as a moral corruption of Iranian culture through Westernization. The perception had class connotations: only elite society in Tehran was assumed capable of fostering such calamities. The extensive circulation of extravagant rumors about high-society circles of non-heteronormative males became part of the criticism of Pahlavi Court culture, which was seen as corrupt and as encouraging further corruption. While subsequent to the establishment of the Islamic Republic and the world-

wide growth of Islamist movements, one tends to associate such criticism with an “Islamist backlash,” in the 1970s, attacks against an “excess of cultural liberties” were a much more broadly voiced concern.³⁹ What sustained the power of non-heteronormative maleness as a sign of excessive liberty (or, as it was by then commonly called “Westoxication”),⁴⁰ was the overwhelming feeling of shame and disgust associated with any public spectacle of non-masculine maleness and non-heteronormative sexuality.

What made “it”—this preferably un-named horror—a cultural assault and moral insult was above all *not* its putative Western origin, but the shame of being *kuni*. The most derogatory word in realm of sexuality, *kuni* literally means anal, but in Persian it exclusively means to be receptive of anal penetration. Young male adolescents often first become familiar with the word as that which signals the edge of abjection; for instance, when parents warn their young son to stay away from certain activities (such as dance) and from certain (ill-reputed) persons, lest they become *kuni*. The equivalent word for women, *baruni*, does similar disciplinary work, but its moral load is much lighter.⁴¹

The gut-shame associated with *kuni* seems to have made it resistant to any measure of self-appropriation and re-signification. When the word *gay* began to arrive in Tehran from the West, some did not take to it. Behzad said he initially “disliked *gay* because in my mind I would translate it into *kuni* and I

stayed away from it.”⁴² Ironically, the more recent acceptance and circulation of *gay* in Persian signifies the same thing: the need for a word that is not-kuni.⁴³ What does that “gut” feeling of revulsion speak to? Why does the spectral threat of be(com)ing kuni seem to be so shattering to a modern (male) Iranian’s sense of self? It is impossible—or, at any rate, it is not my project—to give a convincing etiology of disgust. But it is critical to ask what cultural work disgust performs. What does it do to “the disgusting”? What does it achieve for “the disgusted”? Miller asks, “Why is it that disgust figures so prominently in routine moral discourses, even more so perhaps than the idioms of other moral emotions such as guilt and indignation?”⁴⁴ And how does this sense of profound aversion to kuni relate to the rise in visibility and the increasing prevalence of MtF trans inflections of woman-presenting maleness?

Another source of anxiety directed at males in the 1970s was that of “gender confusion,” or ambiguity. Numerous social commentators wrote essays about the current state of youth lamenting the disappearance of manly valor, and of young men with long hair whose demeanor was that of a flirtatious girl, especially when they danced to rock music—all in “blind imitations of the West.”⁴⁵ For a modern Iranian masculinity that had crafted itself through hetero-gendering previously androgynous concepts of beauty, and by the adoption of more disciplined and uniform sartorial practices during the first half of the

twentieth century, the new fashions and tastes of the young seemed nothing short of a threat to national honor.

Part of this gender anxiety resided in fear of the failure of sex/gender recognition and of what that misrecognition would cause. One woman wrote:

Once upon a time when we looked at men, we had no doubt that they were men. But now with these Beatle-style hair-dos and [tight] pants that show the body and high-heel shoes and manicured nails, we are forced to look again and again to remove our doubt. In the old days, if you called a man woman, that was an insult, but now they try to make themselves look like women.

Several days ago, in Nasir Khusrau Street in Tehran, I ran into a man who had braided hair, was displaying a lot of jewelry and exactly like women had plucked his eyebrows and wore heavy make-up. It is astonishing that these men who always considered women beneath them and thought of themselves as the superior sex are putting themselves in women's place when it comes to dressing and make-up.⁴⁶

Connecting such gender/sex ambiguity to sexual deviation was an easy imaginative leap. Under the bold headline, "The danger of women and men looking alike," another newspaper article cautioned against the clothing,

lifestyles, and work of women and men becoming too similar. This kind of confusion “threatens today’s civilization, in the same manner that two thousand years ago civilized nations such as Greece and Rome ... were overthrown. In ancient Athens, before they were defeated by the Spartans, men had begun to make themselves up like women.... In ancient Rome too, similar things happened.... Moreover sexual deviancy, as it is today, became so prevalent that it caused their overthrow and destruction.”⁴⁷

The spaces opened up by a more visible non-heteronormative maleness and by gender/sex ambiguity nevertheless offered some hopeful possibilities for women-presenting males. As I have already argued, “Gay Tehran” was inclusive of a broad spectrum of male non-heteronormativity. Press reports of genital surgeries beginning to be performed in Iran at this time were particularly important in informing woman-presenting males of more affordable possibilities for changing their bodies, which until then had seemed to be available only at great cost in Europe. On 17 February 1973, the daily *Kayhan* (p. 19), under the headline “In Shiraz, a man voluntarily became a woman!” reported:

A thirty-one-year-old man was operated in Namazi Hospital in Shiraz and became a woman. This man, who does not wish to reveal his/her [non-gender marked pronoun *u* in original] identity, was a perfectly healthy man, but had an intense desire to become

a woman and for a long time s/he was wearing women's clothes and injected female hormones. The patient is a resident of Tehran, had consulted several psychologists before surgery, and the Legal Medical Board in Tehran and Shiraz considered the surgery permissible. The former man has said that soon s/he will be marrying a man who knows her/his condition completely. Doctors say s/he is capable of marriage.

Unlike previous reports of "sex-change" in Iran, which typically involved disambiguation surgery performed on intersex persons, this report specifically emphasized that the person had been "a perfectly healthy man." Inadvertently, it also advertised to any interested reader what the process of sex-change would entail: psychological consultation and acquiring permission from the Legal Medical Board. Most hopefully, it ended in a "happy marriage."

The next year, the women's weekly *Ittila'at-i banuvan* ran the life story of Rashil (formerly Sa'id) Sa'idzadeh over eight weeks.⁴⁸ The coverage in a popular women's weekly transformed the coverage of sex-change from short medical news items into a full-length, melodramatic human-interest story. In the first issue, a huge headline, running the entire width of the page, declared "The 28-Year-Old Newborn to the World of Women." A supra-title exclaimed "wondrous, extraordinary, unbelievable ... but true!" while a subtitle explained that "'Sa'id'

whom everyone thought of as a man has now become a coquettish woman!”

Every week, the story was accompanied by her post-change photographs and, as if “seeing was not believing,” Rashil’s various medical and legal documents were reproduced as well. Most importantly, Rashil’s story was narrated as her own story and in the first person. After a long, patronizing, introductory editorial note in the first installment (as well as shorter editorials in every issue), the story unfolds in Rashil’s narrative voice. The sustained narrative, serialized in the tradition of short novellas, accompanied with her photographs and legal and medical documents, fully fleshed out the story of a livable sex/gender-transitioned life. This was not a story of misery, misfit, and disorder, though all these elements were part of her story. This was instead a “sweet and interesting” story with a happy ending. The eight-week run of Rashil’s story in a popular women’s weekly, which built upon previous decades of news of intersex surgeries reported as sex-change as well as reports of prominent international sex-change surgeries, transformed the idea of sex-change into a tangible possibility within public imagination. Rashil’s detailed life story contributed to a pattern of life-narratives that would structure much of the scientific and popular writings, including autobiographical writings, about transgender/sexuality to the present day.

<INSERT FIGURES 30.4 and 30.5>

As the story of Rashil Sa'idezadeh indicates, it was still possible to write, even at great length, about trans persons (especially if their gender/sexual non-normativity could be vaguely associated with a physical intersex condition) in a way that was unthinkable to write about non-surgically-modified, cross-dressed males living as women. Rashil's story was framed with sympathy, and at times as a form of heroism that triumphed against all odds. The woman-presenting males, on the other hand, could be laughed at, mocked, sniggered about, or tolerated in hostile silence. They could be subject to moral outrage and criminal suspicion. By the mid-1970s, however, the medical establishment, possibly alarmed at the growing rate of sex-change surgeries performed outside any norms of institutional medical supervision, transferred the moral judgment against homosexuality onto trans persons. It took the professional and disciplinary power of the Medical Council of Iran (MCI) to bring the full weight of opprobrium associated with homosexuality to bear on the life-options of woman-presenting males, and thereby to delineate and enforce a kinship relationship between male homosexuality and MtF trans.

Science Rules on Unmanly Males

Formed only in 1969, the Medical Council of Iran established a whole series of regulations for medical practice during the first years of its operation. It also acted as the authority where complaints about medical practice could be filed and reviewed.⁴⁹ In the early 1970s, it began to produce guidelines on new medical practices, such as acupuncture. Indeed, its rulings on sex-change surgery and acupuncture were decided in the same session of the Board of Directors on 28 September 1976. Alarmed by the apparent increase in genital surgeries among woman-presenting males, and by the growing public knowledge of these practices, the MCI decided to ban sex-change surgeries, except in the case of the intersex. A huge front-page headline in the daily *Kayhan* informed the public of this decision on 10 October 1976. The newspaper explained that the decision “meant that sex-change through surgical operations and the like which are aimed to solely change someone’s apparent condition is no longer permitted.” It quoted “an informed source” as saying that “this operation can cause psychological and physical harm and that is why MCI has banned it.... From now on any doctor who performs such operations will be legally prosecuted.” The paper added that, “up to now some 30 sex-change operations have been performed in Iran.”

<INSERT FIGURE 30.6>

The full text of the decision was first published some three years later in the *Newsletter of the Medical Council of Iran*. It read:

In general, changing the apparent sex through surgical operations and the like is not possible, “neither from a psychological nor from a physiological respect.” Since this type of young men—who now insistently ask that their apparent condition be changed—cannot become a future perfect woman and become married to a man as a woman, and since the hole that is created for them will most likely become a source of chronic infections, and since there is a high probability that they will then express enmity toward the persons who have changed their condition and their sex, or at least they will express regret under conditions that a reversal to their prior condition is not possible, therefore such persons must be considered mental patients, they must be treated psychologically, and one cannot permit that they would be moved out of their current condition and appearance.⁵⁰

The delay in publication perhaps indicated a level of disagreement among medical practitioners on this issue, and may have reflected debates within the medical

community that dated back to the 1940s, when Iran's preeminent gynecologist, Dr. Jahanshah Salih, in his seminal textbook, had argued strongly against the possibility, advisability, and morality of sex-change. Indeed, this difference of opinion continues to inform conceptions and practices of sex-change in Iran today. The statement is a remarkable document on many levels. It implies that to be a "perfect woman" is to be a perfect "hole," and that surgically modified MtF trans individuals are deficient in womanhood to the extent that the surgeries they receive produce unsatisfactory holes. The concern expressed is evidently driven in part by the expressed dissatisfaction with the quality of surgery woman-presenting males were receiving. But it was also a move to put medicine's house in order, in keeping with other efforts to promote professionalization.

Officially, no sex-change surgeries took place in reputable hospitals after 1976. Dr. Yahya Behjatnia was a prominent gynecologist who for many years headed the Family and Infertility Clinic of Jahanshah Salih Hospital in Tehran, the primary teaching hospital for gynecological training, and the hospital known for having a team of surgeons who operated on the intersex; he recalled that many woman-presenting males would visit him and beg him to change their sex. Often, he explained, by the time such persons would come to him for removal of male sexual organs and vaginal construction, they were already dressing as women and looking like women, and had already obtained hormonal treatment and already

had breasts. But he would tell them that genital sex-change was not a permitted practice. If they insisted, he would advise them to go abroad for the surgery.⁵¹ Some surgeons in the late 1970s, however, still carried out sex-change operations. They either did it surreptitiously in smaller private clinics, or they manipulated the medical system simply by listing their clients as intersex on hospital records.

Another prominent gynecologist, Dr. Mehdi Amir-Movahedi, was a highly regarded specialist in uterine surgeries, intersex surgeries, and vaginal construction for women who were born without vaginas, or with vaginas with very restricted openings.⁵² He served on the Board of Directors of MCI for several years, and he echoed the observations of his colleague Dr. Behjatnia. He compared the situation to that of women seeking abortion. At the time, this was illegal except under strict exemptions, such as a pregnancy that threatened the mother's life. Yet with the right connections and money, many doctors would perform abortions.⁵³ At Jahanshah Salih Hospital, Dr. Movahedi explained, "we were very strict, we would not do anything that was against regulations, nor would we train medical students for illegal surgeries. I worked there for some 20-30 years and I do not recall a single case of sex-change surgery. If any of our trainees performed this in their own clinic, the MCI would prosecute them." Why, then, did the MCI issue an official statement on sex change, I asked? "If there were any related complaints, it was not when I served there. But many in the old

days would do things for money and perhaps that is what happened.”⁵⁴

Peculiarities in the timing of the publication of the MCI decision on surgical sex-change, coupled with later interviews with prominent gynecologists who worked at the time in Jahanshah Salih Hospital but insist that no sex-change surgeries were performed by reputable surgeons in this period, lead one to speculate that despite persistent disavowals, reputable surgeons were indeed carrying out a whole range of surgeries that began to endanger the reputability of other surgeons. The division was not a matter of differing professional opinions about the advisability of genital surgery for woman-presenting males; rather, it involved matters of moral reputation. By this time, in the dominant scientific discourse, intersex and trans persons had come to belong to distinctly different categories. The latter had become affiliated with sexual deviancy, rather than birth defect. It was the morality of sex change—or rather, the moral status of the persons requesting or performing sex change—that was at issue. This was indeed at the heart of public conversations at the moment of the MCI decision against surgical sex change in 1976.

The 1976 MCI decision had paradoxical effects. It must have made some surgeons more cautious about sex-change operations; but the practice of surgical sex-change continued, along with media interest in it. The medical community as well, even in the publications of the MCI itself, continued to produce articles that

covered the subject of sex-change in supportive terms.⁵⁵ Indeed, the MCI's insistence on the impossibility of sex-change, along with the simultaneous banning of surgeries deemed impossible, combined with the prominent coverage of the decision in the national dailies, created a productive public conversation that circulated knowledge of surgical sex-change on an unprecedented scale. Against the MCI's intentions, perhaps, the very possibility of such operations came to broader attention.

Noushin, for example, now in her fifties, said she had no idea such operations were possible in Iran before she read these newspaper reports. In the 1970s, she socialized as part of circle of singers and entertainers. Her/his parents had noticed her/his "incredible voice" when s/he was a teenager, and encouraged her/him to take voice lessons. She became a singer, and continues to be much in demand even today, although she now performs only at private parties.⁵⁶ Noushin counted among her friends many of the famous male and female vocal artists of the 1970s. She and another close friend, the son/daughter of a high-ranking army officer, had been planning in the mid-1970s to go to Europe for their sex-change surgeries. Her friend's father was making arrangements for them to be seen at a famous London clinic. The MCI decision and the subsequent newspaper coverage made them realize they might possibly get what they wanted in Iran. Noushin and her friend visited Dr. Taqavi in Asia Hospital (the same hospital and surgeon who

had operated on Rashil Sa'idezadeh), as well as Dr. Behjatnia. Both advised them to go abroad under the current circumstances. Eventually, in 1977, after a period of hormone therapy in Iran, they both went abroad for their operations.⁵⁷

Aside from going abroad or using “back-street” surgeons, the other option remained living as a woman-presenting male without surgical transformation (obtaining hormones seems to have continued to be as possible as before). Many took this latter route. One such woman-presenting male, now internationally known, was Maryam Khatun Mulk-ara.⁵⁸ Born male in 1950, Mulk-ara, according to her many accounts of her earlier life, was already going out to parties dressed as a woman by her late teens.⁵⁹ At age eighteen, walking home from such a party, a car stopped and she noticed the occupants were “three *transsexual* males just like me.” The moment she joined them in the car marked for Mulk-ara the beginning of a new life; she referred to this accidental meeting “as the true moment of my entry into a collectivity, a group of people like myself.... In those days, there was no distinction between *gay*, two-sexed people, or *transsexuals*. Everyone knew these individuals existed, but no one knew exactly what the problem was. People referred to all these individuals as ‘iva-khvahar’ [o’sister]” (p. 7). Mulk-ara described the gatherings and parties she attended with her friends as “a place where everyone was a woman, that is, even though they were known as males in social norms of recognition, but they were women. The ambience was

just like the ambience of womanly gatherings. We talked about fashion and other women's issues.”⁶⁰ In the early 1970s, Mulk-ara started working at the Iranian National Radio and Television, and she went to work dressed as a woman. It was there that she was first encouraged to go abroad for a sex-change operation. She spent some time in London in 1975 to learn more about herself and to look into various possibilities, and it was there, she claimed, that she “learned about *transsexuality* and realized I was not a passive *homosexual*.”⁶¹ Upon returning from London, Mulk-ara began to lobby various authorities to see what could be done in Iran, but everyone told her that because of the prevailing social atmosphere, the government could not do anything. By this time, of course, the MCI had closed the emerging medical possibilities for sex-reassignment surgery in Iran.

During this same period, Mulk-ara became concerned about the implications of her practices from a religious point of view. “I was in a religious conundrum [az lihaz-i shar‘i sardargan].” She visited Ayatollah Bihbihani, who consulted the Qur’an; it opened on the Maryam chapter. Mulk-ara considered this a very auspicious sign, for Maryam is the only chapter bearing a woman’s name; this occasion provided her with her eventual post-op name, Maryam). Ayatollah Bihbihani suggested that Mulk-ara should contact Ayatollah Khomeini on this issue, who at the time was in Najaf. Ayatollah Khomeini confirmed that “sex-

change was permitted and that after surgery, she must live her life as a woman.”⁶²

At this point, she began to plan to go to Thailand, but by then the years of revolutionary upheavals had erupted.

Mulk-ara eventually did go to Thailand for her surgery, in 2002. But in the early months of 1979, once the general strikes came to an end, she, like most people, simply went back to work—and here her troubles began. “They asked me who are you? Why do you look like this? When I insisted that I had a condition, they set up a meeting for me with a doctor at Day Clinic [a top private clinic]. But the doctors’ treatment of me was unbelievable; it was gross. This was just the beginning of a series of arrests, questioning me over and over again.... Dr. Bahr al-‘Ulum and the director of Sida va Sima’s [the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB), which was previously National Iranian Radio and Television (NIRT)] health clinic threatened me, saying they would set me on fire. Eventually they forced me to take male hormones and go into male clothes.... This kind of treatment continued till early 1980s; these were bad years for *gays* and *dau-jinsi* [double-sex] people. I heard several were arrested and spent time at Evin prison.”

Mulk-ara was not the only woman-presenting male forced out of NIRT/IRIB. Haideh, now in her late forties, used to teach animation classes there before she was expelled. Eventually, she opted for sex-change in the late 1990s and now

has her own graphic design business. Natasha was a young make-up artist, similarly forced out of NIRT/IRIB. For a while, she tried to find jobs in private film studios, but these studios were also under increasing scrutiny for perceived immoral conduct. Eventually, she opened her own hair-dressing salon and has become quite well-known in Tehran. Today, two other MtFs are also employed in her salon.

In the early 1980s, as the Islamic Republic was taking shape, Maryam Mulk-ara began her persistent lobbying of various authorities to change the situation for woman-presenting males who did not wish to dress and live as men. Under the new regime, the moral purification of society became a systemic priority. Moral purification measures included closing down sites that were considered spaces of corruption, such as the red-light district businesses, bars, night-clubs, and many cafés and cinemas. It meant a series of horrifying public executions of women and men on charges of prostitution and sodomy. It meant intense scrutiny of all institutions, especially those such as the mass media and the universities, which were considered critical for production of a new revolutionary Islamic culture and society, but were thought to be populated by corrupt persons who had to be purged. As Mulk-ara put it in her interview, these were indeed “bad years for *gays* and *dau-jinsi* people.”

The spectrum of non-heteronormative male-bodied persons in the 1970s

had included woman-presenting males as well as males who did not dress as or look like women. The latter's non-heteronormativity was focused on their desire for men, while they continued to live lives largely indistinguishable—to the uninitiated—from normative males. These males, some of whom now name themselves as *gay* or are so named by others, had shared in the increased visibility of non-heteronormative males of the 1970s. That visibility became dangerous in the years following the 1979 change of regime. These men had to adopt a more circumspect style of life, something that indeed had been a way of life for many of them already. But while the sexual politics of the new government could be warded off by some non-heteronormative males simply by living more circumspect lives, woman-presenting males faced a peculiar challenge in the new republic, when public gender-separation emerged as an important ethical project. A totally homosocial gendering of public spaces was seen as the ideal, although it was considered largely unachievable in practice. Nevertheless, strict codes of dress and gender presentation in public were put in place by a series of measures over the period 1979-81.⁶³ The self-perceptions and preferred styles of living for some non-heteronormative males included, and at times critically depended on, their ability to present themselves as women and to be visibly feminine in public—but the gender norms set in place in the early days of the IRI made that nearly impossible. As Mulk-ara and others explained, many people like her felt

forced to grow mustaches and beards and live, at least in daytime, as men. Living a double life by presenting as a woman at night, which was practiced by many woman-presenting males even in the 1970s, suddenly became much more hazardous, to the extent that it remained possible at all.

As we have seen, in the 1970s, woman-presenting males had carved for themselves spaces of relative acceptance in particular places and professions. The more public spaces of such “acceptability,” for instance in the entertainment industry, were at once spaces of “disrepute” but also spaces in which non-normative living could be safely cordoned off and marginalized. They provided not only a measure of safety for woman-presenting males, but also for their containment and confinement from the larger society. Woman-presenting males performed the vulgar and the deviant, and the deployment of these semi-licit styles in the popular entertainment of the 1970s provided for partial tolerance of those deemed deviant.⁶⁴ The 1979 revolution, particularly the cultural purification campaigns of the first few years of the new republic, ruptured this dynamic. The vulgar, taken in the Islamist discourse (and indeed on the political Left as well) to represent the extreme embodiment of late-Pahlavi corruption, became yet another ground for massive repression of social deviance.

The enforcement of public gender codes in the post-1979 years disrupted the old continuum of male non-heteronormativity. While it was possible to be a

closeted *gay* man, living openly as a woman-presenting male became increasingly impossible. Woman-presenting males not only carried the stigma of male same-sex practices, they also transgressed the newly imposed regulations of gendered dressing and presentation in public. They were always assumed to be “passive homosexuals,” facing the same severe interrogations, sometimes anal rape, imprisonment, or death. Transdressed males walking in the streets would be arrested on charges of prostitution. Some, like Mulk-ara, were forced to take male hormones and change into male clothing, and could no longer go to work looking “like that.” One key effect of the policies of the early 1980s was thus the categorical bifurcation of *gay* and *transsexual*. The practices of everyday life within both categories depended on the public disavowal of homosexuality, and both were likewise predicated on the public expression of gender normativity. Given the religious sanction to sex-change offered by Ayatollah Khomeini, the categorical bifurcation of non-heteronormative maleness played out quite differently in the IRI, in the years ahead, than it did in Europe and the United States. Being *transsexual*, rather than *gay*, emerged as the more socially acceptable way of being a non-heteronormative male.

Acknowledgments

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Configurations of Gender and Sexuality in Contemporary Iran (forthcoming, Duke University Press) and was made possible by the superb editorial work of Susan Stryker. I am deeply grateful.

Image Credits

Figure 30.1: *Khvandaniha*, October 1, 1955, 37. Figure 30.2: *Khvandaniha*, September 25, 1954, 37. Figure 30.3: Nargis Salihi at the police station. *Kayhan*, May 13, 1969, 18. Figure 30.4: *Ittila'at-i banuvan*, January 9, 1974, 13. Figure 30.5: Rashil again. *Ittila'at-i banuvan*, January 30, 1974, 13. Figure 30.6: *Kayhan*, October 11, 1976, 5.

Notes

1. See, for instance, Janet Afary, *Sexual Politics in Modern Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009). Afary states, “By the 1970s, a small gay male subculture was gradually taking root in elite circles of Tehran, mostly as a result of interaction with American and European advisors who lived in the country” (243). Similarly, Firoozeh Papan-Matin has suggested, “By the 1970s, Iran had a small and active gay subculture.” “The Case of Mohammad Khordadian, an Iranian Male Dancer,” *Iranian Studies*, 42: 1 (February 2009): 127-138; quote from 128.

2. For reports of persecutions and executions in the early months and years of the establishment of the Islamic Republic, see *The Advocate*, 266, May 3 1979, 7; 267, May 17, 1979, 7, and 12-13; 276, September 20, 1979, 17; 281, November 29, 1979, 12; 283, December 27, 1979, 8; 293, May 29, 1980, 12. See also *Homan*, No. 16 (Spring 2000), 16-17, for Iranian newspaper clips of executions from this period on the charge of lavat (sodomy). See also Afary, *Sexual Politics*, 265. In much of such coverage, it is routinely said that Islamic law prohibits homosexuality—even though there is no notion of homosexuality in Islamic law—or that the Islamic Republic made homosexuality a capital offense and that gay men are executed in Iran for expressions of open homosexuality or on charges of homosexuality. On this issue as far as recent executions and the international campaigns are concerned, see Scott Long, “Unbearable Witness: How Western Activists (Mis)recognize Sexuality in Iran,” in *Contemporary Politics* 15: 1 (March 2009), 119-136. The slippage is important for contemporary politics of sexuality in Iran.

3. Jerry Zarit, “The Iranian Male—an Intimate Look,” *GPU* [Gay Peoples Union] *News*, October 1979, 19.

4. See Mary Renault, *The Persian Boy* (New York: Pantheon, 1972), and, for instance, Jim Kepner’s review in *The Advocate*, January 31, 1973, 26.

5. The two domains are highly interactive: Jerry Zarit’s article in *GPU News*

was translated and published in one of the earliest diasporic Iranian gay journals, *Homan*, published first in Sweden [first issue dated May-June 1991] and later in the U.S. See *Homan* 5, April-May 1992, 2-5.

6. In these distinctions, what often is lost is the very modernity of hamjinsbazi itself. The nineteenth-century vocabulary of what is at times conceived as the pre-history of modern same-sex relations—such as amradbazi [playing with a male adolescent], 'ubnah-'i' ['afflicted' with a desire for anal penetration], bachchah'bazi [playing with a young person]—did not place the two sides in one category [jins] of person whether in a pejorative sense [same-sex player] or in its more recent recuperation as same-sex orientation. Even today, some in “same-sex” relationships do not recognize themselves of the same kind.

7. See for instance, Avaz, “Tafavut-i ‘hamjins-gara’ ba hamjins-baz va bachcheh-baz dar chist?” [What is the difference between ‘the same-sex-inclined’ with the same-sex-player and child-player,”] in *Homan* 9 (October-November 1994), 27-33.

8. See Sima Shakhsari, “From Hamjensbaaz to Hamjensgaraa: Diasporic Queer Reterritorializations and Limits of Transgression.” Unpublished paper.

9. For a feminist critique, see Janet Jakobsen, *Working Alliances and the Politics of Difference: Diversity and Feminist Ethics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998).

10. *Khvandaniha*, June 30, 1956, 29, reprinted from *Payam*. For other reports of women opting to live and work as men, see *Ittila 'at-i banuvan*, June 17, 1963, 12 and 75; *Zan-i ruz*, special new-year issue, March 1965, 12-14.
11. See Chapter Two in Afsaneh Najmabadi, *Women with Mustaches and Men without Beards: Gender and Sexual Anxieties of Iranian Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005) for some examples of “keeping a young man” (amrad-dari, adam-dari), as it was then called.
12. *Khvandaniha* May 4, 1947, 13-14.
13. *Kayhan*, January 5, 1977, 2, and again January 6, 1977, 1.
14. See Chapter Two of my manuscript, *Sex-in-Change: Configurations of Gender and Sexuality in Contemporary Iran* (Duke University Press, forthcoming) for further discussion of these cases.
15. *Khvandaniha*, January 29, 1955, 20-22.
16. Anthony Shay, “The Male Dancer in the Middle East and Central Asia,” *Dance Research Journal* 38: 1-2 (2006), 137-162. Quotes from 137 and 138 respectively.
17. Shay, “The Male Dancer,” 139.
18. Anthony Shay, “Choreographic Hypermasculinity in Egypt, Iran, and Uzbekistan,” *Dance Chronicle: Studies in Dance and the Related Arts*, 31, 2 (2008), 211-238. Quote from 234.

19. Shay, "The Male Dancer," 139.

20. Zan-push, literally meaning dressed in women's clothes, refers to male actors who played women's roles in traditional theatrical performances, whether in passion plays (ta'zieh) or in ruhauzi plays (literally over the pond, because the stage was provided with covering a garden pond with planks of wood) at celebratory occasions. For an important analysis of different styles of enacting female personas in these plays, see William O. Beeman, "Mimesis and Travesty in Iranian Traditional Theatre," in *Gender in Performance: The Presentation of Difference in the Performing Arts*, ed. Laurence Senelick (Medford, MA: Tufts University Press, 2002), 14-25. The expression zan-push has now become part of trans-vocabulary for MtFs who change to female clothes.

21. *Khvandaniha* October 1, 1955, 37. Parenthetical punctuations in original. Other issues of this journal similarly carried news and photographs of male actors in female roles. See October 13, 1955, 37, for a picture of Majid Muhsini (an actor) in women's clothes, replacing a female actress who was sick on that performance day; December 22, 1955, 39, picture of another male actor, Mr. Hushmand in another production of the play "Charley's Aunt" in Rasht; January 12, 1956, 39, again Tabish as "Charley's Aunt"; March 21, 1961, 98, pictures of four male actors, Tabish, Vahdat, Qanbari, and Bahmanyar, all in female roles. The journal had similar brief reports on non-Iranian performances of male actors

in female roles. See September 1, 1959, 16 (Jack Lemon and Tony Curtis trans-dressed as female musicians in *Some Like it Hot*); June 11, 1960, 19 (picture of an Italian male actor in a female role); December 19, 1961, 39 (another picture of female-dressed Tony Curtis) among many other similar ones.

22. For an informative history of Iranian cinema and its different genres, see Hamid Naficy, "Iranian Cinema," in Oliver Leaman, ed., *Companion Encyclopedia of Middle Eastern and North African Film* (London: Routledge, 2001), 130-222.

23. Beeman, "Mimesis and Travesty," 22.

24. See "Khatirat-i jalib-i yik ruznameh-nigar-i Irani: dar in shahr mardan ba libas-i zananeh az hamjinsan-i khaud pazira'i mikunad," [Fascinating memoirs of an Iranian journalist: In this city men in women's clothes entertain people of their own sex] for a report on West Berlin's night life, in *Khvandaniha*, August 18, 1959, pp. 16-19; also "Mauvazib bashid khanumi kih kinar-i shuma nishasteh mard nabashad!" [Watch out, lest the woman sitting next to you is a man!], *Khvandaniha*, April 25, 1959, 52-54 (reprinted from *Umid-i Iran*).

25. 'Ali Sha'bani, "Gardishi dar kafeh-ha va risturanha-yi Tehran," [A tour of Tehran's Cafés and restaurants], *Khvandaniha*, September 25, 1954, 22-25 and 36-37. Such reports continued to appear in the 1960s and '70s. The emphasis, however, shifted to highlighting the growth of dance clubs as part

of the “cultural turn” to dance among the youth. For one example, see Gregory Lamya, “Raqqas-khaneh-ha-yi zirzamini-i Tehran bazar-i garmi yafteh-and,” [Tehran’s underground dance dens have a heated market] *Kayhan*, January 25, 1969, 16. See also *Ittila‘at*, October 6, 1976, 7, reporting on a Turkish singer appearing in women’s clothes and make-up.

26. *Kayhan*, 19 April 1973, 22. For another similar report, see *Kayhan*, October 11, 1973, 22. This was the case of two young males, eighteen and nineteen years of age, “in women’s clothes and make-up,” arrested on Tehran-Saveh road, and charged with fooling men and stealing their money. The men denied the charges and stated that they were music performers [mutrib], working in the area villages. “We make up ourselves as women and in weddings make the guests laugh and be amused by imitating women’s movements.” Both reports carry photographs of arrested women-presenting males.

27. I have specifically opted not to name this category of males living-as-women “transwoman” because of the specific meaning of that word in today’s English-speaking context.

28. *Kayhan*, May 13, 1969, 18.

29. The latter’s style is seen as a signal to men who desire non-masculine males—whether for hire or not. The stigma of that kind of MtF-ness is elaborated in terms of its collapse onto sex-work; it is assumed that exaggerated female appearance

is always a sign of commercial availability. It demarcates one style of MtF-ness as virtuous, pressing the other to the outside of domain of acceptability to community membership—this other is not seen as truly trans. It is marked by the weight of social shame associated with “passive” homosexuality. Among self-identified gay men, on the other hand, the distancing is seen as a defense against the bodily changes that would turn a gay man into a deformed woman.

30. Khanum is a generic form of address for an adult female. I, for instance, am often addressed as Khanum Najmabadi in Iran. In this period, it was also used as an “insider” designation for males living-as-women. Information presented here about this sub-culture of Tehran life in the 1970s is based on conversations with several men in their fifties who now identify as gay, and several male-born adults who now identify as MtF.

31. It is more common today, especially in middle class urban circles, for men-loving men to self-reference themselves as gay [the English word pronounced exactly the same in Persian]. This was rare in the 1970s.

32. One self-identified gay man reported noticing a growing presence of what he referred to as *trans* women in these gatherings. Behzad, interviewed summer 2006—evidently this observation was from the vantage point of 2006 and within a conversation about transsexuality today.

33. For a sensitive depiction of one such life, see Farhad Rastakhiz, “Mardi dar

hashieh” [A man on the margin], in a volume of two short stories, *Mardi dar hashieh* (Hamburg: Nashr-i Kalagh, nd), in which the main character/narrator Mr. Qurayshi, is an assistant principle in a high school by day and lives a lone womanly life at home. I am grateful to Elham Gheytonchi for bringing this story to my attention.

34. Behzad, interviewed summer 2007. Johnson, in the context of southern Philippines, has noted, “most find repulsive the idea that one would have sex with their ‘own kind.’” See Mark Johnson, *Beauty and Power: Transgendering and Cultural Transformation in the Southern Philippines* (Oxford: Berg, 1997), 90.

35. Cyrus, interview, fall 2007.

36. In the 1970s, when the word gay was not a dominant self-reference, few would use homosexual (in its French pronunciation in Persian—*humausiksual*) either. It was largely used in psycho-medical discourse. In recent decades, gay has become a more acceptable word, though its meaning, as the above articulations indicate, is not identical with its usage in English. Often, Persian words are used as in-words, which if used to refer to someone, would be recognized by another knowing person, but would be safely assumed to mean differently by the unknowing audience. As these words continue to be used in Iran today, I have refrained from recording them here. Some of these patterns recall somewhat similar configurations in pre-1940s New York world of male-male intimacy as

documented and analyzed in George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World 1890-1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), especially Chapter 10, “The Double Life, Camp Culture, and the Making of a Collective Identity.”

37. Behzad, interviewed summer 2007. Whatever the meaning of these rumored “gay weddings” may have been at the time, today both in Iran and in the Iranian diasporic gay and lesbian communities, they are considered “gay weddings” in a more recent sense and as an indication of the lively “gay culture” of the 1970s. These weddings between men constituted a most scandalous public event toward the end of 1970s that continues to be remembered today, in conversations and in print. The event narrated by Behzad is now included in a proto-official publication, Ruhallah Husaynian, *Fisad-i darbar-i Pahlavi* [Corruption of Pahlavi Court], Markaz-i Asnad-i Inqilab-i Islami [Islamic Revolution Documentation Center]. Online edition, last visited: July 19, 2009. Part 3: <http://www.irdc.ir/fa/content/4915/default.aspx>.

38. Martha Vicinus has suggested that these marriages are reminiscent of “what went on in the early 18th-century London molly houses” (email communication, 28 September 2009). One difference, however, seems to be that the marriages in molly houses seem to have been about ceremonials of two men who would possibly be sexual partners even if for a brief time. See Alan Bray, *Homosexuality*

in Renaissance England (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), Chapter Four. Marriages between two khanums seem to have excluded that possibility.

39. See, for instance, anonymous report, “Yadi az jashn-i hunar-i Shiraz va barrisi-i iftizahat-i ’an....” [Notes on the Shiraz Art Festival and its scandalous embarrassments] in which one of the criticisms is explicit talk of homosexuality in one of the plays. *Khvandaniha*, November 21, 1972, 13 and 54-55.

40. Gharbzadigi, a concept that gained popularity through Jalal Al Ahmad’s essay. For an English translation, see *Gharbzadegi—Weststruckness*, trans. John Green and Ahmad Alizadeh (Lexington, Ky.: Mazda Publishers, 1982). For a critical discussion, see Mehrzad Boroujerdi, *Iranian Intellectuals and the West: the Tormented Triumph of Nativism* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1996).

41. Baruni literally means raincoat—I have not been able to trace where this word comes from. Another difference between the two words is that kuni is used to designate an individual man; baruni is used within the context of a relationship between at least two women—as in so-and-so is so-and-so’s baruni.

42. Behzad, interviewed summer 2007.

43. The need for a word that is not derogatory but also not an in-word signifies the emergence of a broader semi-open circulation of these conversations. For that reason, the circulation of *gay* also marks the space of this semi-openness. For a similar dynamic between *gay* and *bantut* in the Philippines, see Johnson, *Beauty*

and Power, 89; and for Thailand, between *gay* and *kathoe*y, see Megan Sinnott, *Toms and Dees: Transgender Identity and Female Same-Sex Relationships in Thailand* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004), 6.

44. William Ian Miller, *The Anatomy of Disgust* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), xi.

45. No author, "Javanan-i ma chizi mian dukhtar va pisar hastand!" [Our youth are something between girls and boys!], *Khvandaniha*, March 6, 1971, p. 18, reprinted from *Khurasan*.

46. Nadereh Shahram, "Men of the Twentieth Century?" *Zan-i ruz*, August 3, 1974, pp. 7 and 86. For another similar essay, see Mahmud 'Inayat, "Jaff al-qalam, jall al-khaliq," *Kayhan*, December 6, 1972, p. 5.

47. *Khvandaniha*, "Khatar-i hamrikhti-i zanan va mardan" [The danger of women and men looking alike], tr. Dr. Kuhsar (no author or source of translation is specified), April 6, 1973, pp. 36-38. Reprinted from *Danishmand*, a general science journal.

48. *Ittila'at-i banuvan*, January 9, 1974, 12-13 and 81; January 16, 1974, 12-13, and 80; January 23, 1974, 11 and 83; January 30, 1974, 13 and 79; February 6, 1974, 21; February 13, 1974, 12, 81, and 83; February 20, 1974, 13 and 82; and February 27, 1974, 19 and 83.

49. Attempts to form an association of health professionals had a much longer

history. See Cyrus Schayegh, “*Who Is Knowledgeable Is Strong*”: *Science, Class, and the Formation of Modern Iranian Society, 1900-1950* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 54-60.

50. *Newsletter of the Medical Council of Iran* 12, July 23, 1979, 29. [quotation marks in original].

51. Interview, December 2007. When I asked about the operation reported in the press in February 1973 that took place in Namazi Hospital of Shiraz, he thought that was a possibility since that hospital had American and American-trained doctors. Doctors trained by Dr. Salih were trained to refuse sex-surgeries except for the intersex. Information about Dr. Behjatnia in the following section is based on interview and on his biographical entry in Muhammad Mahdi Muvahhidi, *Zindigi-nameh-i pizishkan-i nam-avar-i mu‘asir-i Iran [Biographies of famous contemporary Iranian physicians]* 2 (Tehran: Abrun, 2000) 61-64.

52. Information about Dr. Amir-Movahedi is based on interview and on his biographical entry in Muvahhidi, *Zindigi-nameh-i pizishkan* 2, 53-59.

53. Interview, December 2007. On abortion regulations, see the text of revision of Article 42, Point 3 of the Penal Code, May/June 1973, in Gholam Reza Afkhami (ed.), *Women, State, and Society in Iran 1963-78: An Interview with Mahnaz Afkhami* (Bethesda, MD: Foundation for Iranian Studies, 2003), 268-269.

54. Interview, December 2007.

55. See, for example, “Akhlāq-i pizishki dar barabar-i pizishki-i nauvin: masa’il-i ikhtisāsi-i akhlāq-i pizishki” [Medical ethics confronting new medicine: special problems of medical ethics], *Journal of Medical Council of Iran*, 6: 5 (1978): 445-447.

56. Interview, August 2007.

57. Interview, August 2007. The experience was a harrowing one: bad surgeries in several countries over many years, interrupted by the revolution and the closing of borders in the early years of Iran-Iraq war (1980-88).

58. Mulk-ara has been subject of numerous interviews and reports, in Iran and internationally, both in print and film, about Iranian transsexuals. In the book project from which this article is drawn, I will discuss more fully her critical role in creating (and controlling) spaces for trans-activism in Iran over the past decade.

59. I have depended on the following sources for this sketch of Mulk-ara’s life. By far, the most extensive interview with her (and the only one in which she talked at length about her life in the 1970s) appeared as part of a four-page social reportage in the daily *I’timad* (May 8, 2005, 7-10). Mulk-ara, including a picture of her at the center of page 7, was featured on 7 and 10 (interviewed by Hamid Riza Khalidi, the total page coverage was over fourth of the full dossier. Unless noted otherwise, the quotes in this section are all from this interview). This dossier remains the most substantive and serious press coverage of transsexuality

in Iranian press, though many other newspapers and magazines have covered various aspects of the issues. Other sources on Mulk-ara are a short interview with her as part of a dossier on transsexuals in a popular weekly, *Chilchiraq* (May 26, 2007, 7-13, interview on 11) and several phone conversations with her during summer and fall 2006.

60. In my conversations with her, Mulk-ara spoke about two circles in which she socialized in this period; one she called “darbariha,” the Court circle, which according to her included the Shah’s cousin, his chief of staff, and several others she named. The other circle, she referred to as lower middle class “zir-i mutivassit.” The two circles overlapped in that many of the women most desired in the courtly circles were from the lower middle-class circles and would be brought to parties.

61. Interview, summer 2006. The account of how and when she first identified herself, or was identified by a doctor, as a *transsexual* differed in this conversation from those reported in the *I’timad* and *Chilchiraq* interviews in which she said she was sent to a specialist by the National Iranian Radio and Television who diagnosed her as *transsexual* and suggested she should go for surgery. Nowadays, this moment of “learning about *transsexuality*” has become a central narrative feature in the self-presentation of woman-presenting males. In particular, learning to distinguish oneself from “a passive homosexual” has

become a key moment for feminine male-bodied persons. My interviews with Mulk-ara were carried out in 2005-2007 and to some extent reflect the retroactive naming of the consolidation of this distinction in contemporary discourses and practices of transsexuality.

62. “Taghyir-i jinsiyat bilamani‘ ast va ba‘d az ‘amal taklif-i yik zan bar shuma vajib ast.” Noushin and two other *MtFs* I interviewed each claimed that it was them who had obtained the first fatwa from Ayatollah Khomeini on permissibility of changing sex. Interviews, summer 2006 and 2007. I discuss the significance of these multiple “firsts” in the book from which this article is drawn.

63. There is a huge literature on this period’s state policies and resistance by large sections of women against it. Though successfully implemented by the early 1980s, women’s dress public code has remained a perennial site of contestation between sections of the government, dissenting women, and at times, young male youth. See Parvin Paidar, *Women and the Political Process in Twentieth-century Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Minoo Moallem, *Between Warrior Bother and Veiled Sister: Islamic Fundamentalism and the Politics of Patriarchy in Iran* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); and Hamideh Sedghi, *Women and Politics in Iran: Veiling, Unveiling, and Reveiling* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

64. Johnson also discusses, in a different context, the paradox of the *gay/bantut*

being “both celebrated as masters of beauty and style and circumscribed as deviant and vulgar,” and notes “the historical significance of the beauty parlors as both the site and means for gays’ successful occupational reinvention of themselves.” One could argue that in the 1970s Iran, the entertainment industry had become such a site for performers such as Farrukhzad and others, who found a place such as NIRT a site of relative acceptance and flourishing of their performative skills. See *Beauty and Power*, 146-147.